

## National Art Education Association

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### Reflections

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## Reflections

June King McFee

I entered art education in 1952 by starting a community college art program. At that time I had an extensive background in art, but none in education. Moreover, my social awareness was limited to the class-centered perspectives of a Northwest Coast upper-middle-class woman of the period. Organizing the art program required studying educational psychology, sociology, philosophy, and curriculum, which extended my perspectives dramatically regarding the processes of educating in general and, specifically, the processes involved in teaching art.

As I studied the many fields comprising educational foundations, I also observed the behavior of my students. For some students, apparently, I was a good teacher; they were exhibiting a steady growth in communicating through art and in the development of their designing and delineating skills. But there were students I was not reaching. For example, some could not design but could draw; others could not break away from stereotypical ways of viewing the world; others had much to say but were afraid to express themselves; still others were progressing in all ways but came from discouraging home environments that served to block their artistic development. My observations suggested that if proper connections could be made between educational foundations and human behaviors in art, there was help for these students and answers to my teaching dilemmas.

I soon entered a doctoral program at Stanford in educational foundations, where I was encouraged to relate study in diverse fields to art. In psychology my focus was on how perception, creativity, cognitive style and learning related to art; in anthropology and sociology

I began to investigate cultural and economic differences among people that clearly influenced their exposure to art and their ability to respond to it. How art transmits cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs; how art relates to cultural maintenance and the enculturation of children; and how art functions as a major communication system in society became central themes in my thinking. The need for art as a basic communication skill in education became more and more apparent. The relationships between environmental design and the cultural meaning of art took on major significance.

Since that time, I have operated as a kind of translator: one who attempts bridging the gaps between art and education by relating information from the social and behavioral sciences to both art and education. The key events in the history of art education from my interdisciplinary perspective were those that emphasized the complexities that are involved in the teaching of art.

In my perception the single most important event to art education was the Seminar for Research in Art Education held at The Pennsylvania State University in 1965 (see *A Seminar in Art Education for Research and Curriculum Development*, 1966). This seminar included philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, educators, artists, and art educators. The scholars from these other fields presented parallel papers with art educators that illuminated the wide-ranging opportunities and difficulties inherent in relating research in these fields to practice in education and art education. The designers of the conference and the participants were truly defining the dynamics of the field as it was emerging at that time.

Such redefinition needs to be done today. It has been twenty years since a synthesis of ideas from such diverse disciplines has been attempted. Today, perhaps even more than in the early 60s, we need to rekindle our interest in and understanding of the complex foundation upon which art education rests. A number of independent events have transpired that indicate the mood of art education is ripe for such redefinition and synthesis of ideas. Among these indicators are the following items.

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### Editor's Note:

It occurred to me recently that our profession may be inadvertently neglecting one of our greatest recourses, namely, those professionals who have recently retired or who have moved into semiretirement as Professors Emeritus. Accordingly, the commentary section will periodically invite manuscripts from those who were instrumental in the profession's development over the past several decades. In this instance, June King McFee has consented to provide a perspective of her many years in the profession with some carefully considered thoughts about the immediate and long range concerns of art education.

Tape presentations of selected authors in art education are being distributed by the National Art Education Association. This material needs a significant forum like the one provided in the Penn State Seminar. The CEMREL Aspen Conferences and ensuing summary publications, together with the recent series of annual conferences held at the University of Illinois (and published in *Review of Research in Visual Arts Education*), also indicate our collective interest in redefinition.

Although these later conferences were organized around a single unifying theme, the complexity of thought and issues appropriate to the field is apparent in the number of papers from disciplines other than art education. The INSEA conference in Adelaide is another example of diverse perspectives from different disciplines being focused on a single theme, "The Arts and Cultural Diversity." Moreover, this conference attracted worldwide attention to the effects of culture on art and learning.

Such conferences pull together diverse views and increase professional interest through publication of the proceedings. The material from these conferences, along with others held in Canada, England, and elsewhere, needs to be integrated, analyzed, and disseminated into the body of art education knowledge. Our efforts to synthesize such information has lagged sadly behind the numerous conferences and seminars in which the research information was initially presented.

Also, the annual research sessions held at the NAEA Conventions have not been collected, analyzed, or related to educational practice in the arts. The qualitative and cumulative impact this kind of research could make is vitally important to our field. I hope that in the near future the fundamental issues and diverse views expressed in these conferences will be analyzed in an effort to provide some synthesis that might be valuable to redefining our field for the 1980s and the decades beyond.

Although in recent years more articles reviewing previous research have been appearing in *Studies*, there is a need for research historians to provide insight into transitions in the field. We need to be made aware of the underlying ideas of contemporary trends in art education, and how these trends relate to past assumptions. We need to know the character of current philosophical and political assumptions and how they are shaping the future of

art education in American schools. We need to become proficient with the use and analysis of contemporary computer assisted research techniques. Finally, we need to know and understand the major areas of inquiry currently being pursued in the field and its foundational fields.

Dissemination of the issues and concerns presented in professional conferences and seminars might be a task for *Studies in Art Education*, but our national organization lacks the membership to support such a major undertaking within the pages of *Studies*. We must find other ways. I must say in passing, however, as an early editor of *Studies*, that I am impressed with the growing sophistication of the research being published in *Studies* and with the increasing discipline of its editors.

Textbooks that relate research and practice are among the principal means of disseminating information and relating new issues and research to classroom practice. Indeed we have too few of them; probably because we are dependent on a market place that renders them unprofitable by the preponderance of art education courses that emphasize art but not teaching. Moreover, general education courses disregard art as a socio-cultural communication phenomenon and neglect its serious study. Neither circumstance encourages publishers to invest in this field.

A related problem is the task of writing texts. I have had a text in publication almost continually since 1961; each subsequent edition or book has taken longer to research and write than its predecessor. The rate of increase in our knowledge of contributing fields is so much more comprehensive and the population of students and school environments so changing that it may not be possible anymore for one or two people to write a comprehensive text. Rather, it may now be necessary to commission writing teams who are broadly educated yet strongly concentrated so that such integrated information can be better related to educational practice in the arts.

This, in turn, raises questions about graduate programs. Are we preparing people with the breadth of knowledge to help identify the many aspects of the field while possessing strong theoretical and research skills in given areas? Are our graduates learning that their own students are individuals with varied social and cultural histories? Are they learning that not only art, but social contexts and educa-

tional values are ever-changing? Our art teachers need to understand not only art and education but the beliefs and values held by the people in their community that are manifested in their schools.

All of these points have major implications for the field and for our professional organization. We need to welcome diversity and

change, yet see both in the context of our major purpose—educating in the arts. We need synthesis and increased internal communication as education is again called upon to prove itself. We need to know who we are and what we are able to contribute in as broad a context as possible.

## A Word from the Publications Editor

Since last year *Studies in Art Education* has a new approach to its publications section. Wishing to encourage more submissions and lively material, the Publications Editor welcomes critiques in several forms. In addition to single books, authors may discuss several books on a single theme or several books with apparently contradictory positions. They may comment on a single published research report or on issues raised by a line of research involving a number of studies. The Recent Publications section prints invited reviews together with submissions from the field.

Publications to be reviewed may be drawn from a variety of disciplines so long as their relevance to art education is evident. Reviews of research published in journals outside art

education are especially welcome. Traditional areas of attention in addition to art education per se have been art history, art criticism, art processes, theory and practice in education, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. More recent scholarship in multicultural, special needs, continuing, and museum education has expanded the kinds of publications of interest to art educators.

*Studies* prefers penetrating but balanced critiques rather than a simply reportorial review. Clear writing and standard usage always help the reader; graceful writing or wit will not necessarily be found objectionable. The particular application or relevance to art education of the works discussed always should be made explicit.